

THE ARNCLIFFE PUZZLE

Synopsis of preceding chapters
on page 16

CHAPTER XV

Bradshaw Has an Adventure

THERE was a knock at the door, and Lester entered. He and Bradshaw had been thrown a good deal together. Staying, as they did, at the same inn, they met frequently, and each man recognized qualities in the other which tended to establish confidence and friendship.

"Poison yourself," said the American laconically, pushing the whisky-decanter invitingly toward his new visitor.

Brading, unaware that Lester was acquainted with his theft of Edith's second letter, responded to the young doctor's curt nod with the ingratiating smile of one who would have by-gones be by-gones.

"Well," said Lester in biting accents, addressing himself to the detective, "may I ask if you have posted that other letter of Miss Holt's, or whether you have appropriated for your own use the draft contained in it?"

For once Brading's inscrutable countenance betrayed emotion. He went deathly pale, and the excuse that was trembling on his lips gave place to the truthfulness of honest indignation. "I don't think I have deserved that," he said with something of natural dignity. "Miss Holt's letter, and the money as well, have been posted safely enough, and I am bound to say, in justice to the young lady, that what she wrote clears her at least from one suspicion. Now, sir, technically I have committed a crime which might have grave consequences for me. Though you have really no evidence against me, I am not going to attempt any concealment. I have only taken reasonable measures to unravel a mysterious murder, and I am willing to put it to Mr. Bradshaw here whether in the interests of justice I did not act rightly."

"Why, say," remarked Bradshaw, "I don't know a thing about the matter yet. You say you have committed a crime. I am open to believe that about anybody. Don't be discouraged, Brading. At your age, it can't be the first crime you have committed; and I am dead sure it won't be the last."

The answer came from Lester, who found the American's lazy cynicism a little jarring. "Mr. Brading's crime is simply this," he said curtly: "he has been tampering with the post-office in order to get hold of Miss Holt's private correspondence."

"I don't think we ought to blame him for that," remarked the American in the same even tone. "A man does not become a detective, anyway, unless he has the instincts of a horse-thief. Sit down, Brading," as the official, really hurt, half rose. "I don't mean that as personal—in fact, I am trying to justify you. See here, Dr. Lester, if you face things fairly and squarely, you must realize that no detective work is possible without what you and I would call underhanded methods. After all, nothing of the sort will injure an innocent person in the long run; and your British police have the reputation of being reasonably honest, though," as Brading's countenance cleared a little, "I am not much of a believer in miracles myself. Look cheerful, Brading, and have another drink. Dr. Lester is going to forgive you."

William Lincoln Bradshaw suggested having a drink with appalling frequency, but as his own habit was to take rather less than a teaspoonful on each occasion, he at least suffered nothing from his pressing hospitality.

"I want no forgiveness from anybody," said the detective sulkily. "I am only doing my duty. This Miss Holt may be as innocent as you or I, but you can't dispute that there is a bit of a mix-up somewhere. I don't profess to be a Sherlock

Romance and Mystery Resulting From
the Toxic Discoveries of George Lester

By GORDON HOLMES

Author of "A Mysterious
Disappearance"

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"Poison Yourself," Said the American Laconically

Holmes. My system is to give my attention to the person who benefits most from a crime. And I have never drawn blank yet."

"Well now," said Bradshaw to Lester, "I was just telling this unerring sleuth-hound of some peculiarities which had struck me in the conduct of that blatant Britisher, Warren. Don't wink the nap off your eyelids at me, friend Brading. Just at present I purpose to make my calculations on the basis that Dr. Lester is a square man, and if you don't like it you can do the other thing, for the proposition is my own. Now, Lester, I have also been telling our friend here about that poacher fellow whose extraordinary access of wealth we have both noticed. And I have further drawn his attention to the fact that Harry Warren is drinking a great deal more than anyone takes out of mere devotion to liquor. He gives one the impression of a man so harassed that he is endeavoring all the time to escape from his own vicinity. I am inclined to attribute all this to the workings of a troublesome imp called conscience, which we read about in fairy tales."

"Another thing, I have made some considerable study of Arncliffe Hall lately, and I notice there is a light in one of the rooms half through the night—conscience again. People who live in a sleepy hollow like this go to bed early, in the hope of dreaming they are alive. So, I think, if we could take a peep into that room, we should see something to enlighten us."

"What room is it?" asked Brading.

"The room just over the study, where old Aingier got soaked on the *cabeza*."

Bradshaw had spent his early days amid that delightful society which infests the vicinity of the Rio Grande. When talking of deeds of violence, he had a habit of introducing here and there a word of Spanish.

"Oh, but it is no good bothering about that,"

protested the detective. "It is simply the private sitting-room of Mrs. Warren the housekeeper."

"So I supposed. But what special cares has Mrs. Warren to keep her up so late? I first noticed this burning of the midnight oil on the night of the attack on Aingier. As you know, Dr. Lester, I waited until you decided that your patient was out of immediate danger; and then we came back here together, nearly at daylight. It was reasonable enough that Mrs. Warren should remain awake on that occasion, and I should have thought nothing further of the matter, had not the same thing been repeated night after night. I watched round about the Hall—partly because this business has interested me, and partly because I have been doing a little detective business on my own account. I surmise this much: that Mrs. Warren waits up to talk with that hopeful son of hers. And I am inclined to think that a little knowledge of the situation on our part would produce a whole lot of information."

"I don't like spying," objected Lester, a note of decision in his voice.

"Neither do I," retorted Bradshaw; "but I should like still less for that winsome young girl to be charged with murder, as Brading proposes. Anyway, it is not your funeral. I am only telling you a plan of my own."

"If there is anything I can do to help Miss Holt—" began Lester eagerly.

"Well, it doesn't need a stack of us to spy on one window, but if you really want to do violence to your high-toned feelings, you might just go and mix some liquor with the wealthy gentleman they call Leigh, and shadow him home too. I wouldn't be at all surprised if that skunk Warren dropped into the game before you are through."

Bradshaw looked at his watch. "Half-past ten," he said. "You have half an hour in which to cultivate Mr. Robert Leigh. Now go away, boy, and leave Brading and myself to elaborate our low-down plans."

Lester, half offended, yet conscious that Bradshaw was in the right, went down-stairs; but there was no sign of the poacher, and having nothing better to do, the young doctor presently went to bed to dream of Edith.

Bradshaw and the detective, both naturally taciturn, remained silent for a long time, considering the position. There was really little to go upon. A light in a window at unusual hours might have a dozen adequate explanations. The mere events which had happened at the Hall would be enough under ordinary circumstances to account for the sleeplessness of an elderly woman to whom Arncliffe Hall had practically represented the world for so many years.

But Brading, finding himself at something of a loss, was ready to follow the slightest clue. There was a reward of ten thousand pounds at stake, and the hanging of an innocent person would be a cheap price to pay for half the money. Bradshaw, like Lester, had declined from the beginning to admit even a possibility of Edith's guilt; but he realized nevertheless that there was negative evidence in existence against her which, though it might not place her life in peril, yet might embitter it irrevocably. And as far as lay in his power he resolved to save her.

"I have been studying the geography pretty carefully," he explained to his companion after a long pause. "There is a tree which looks very conveniently into that window. A boy who is accustomed to bird's-nesting might fix himself up very comfortably."

"Perhaps," interrupted Brading acidly, "you could suggest something suitable to a man of forty-five who suffers from rheumatism?"

"I haven't any rheumatism," replied the American